

# ACT OF KINDNESS REPAID 43 YEARS LATER

**14 families that lost homes to Ike will reap the benefits of singer Neil Diamond's fondness for area**

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Hummingbirds buzz at a feeder as Wayne Dearman, 85, watches from inside the FEMA trailer that has been his home for months. He has been confined to bed because of deteriorating vertebrae. His new home will be handicap-accessible.

Wayne Dearman came to the same area a decade earlier while working as a manager for Hughes Tool. Dearman, now 85, loved the serenity of the lapping waters so much he decided to spend his retirement enjoying the view from his bay-front home.

Yet the water that drew them there became the storm surge that demolished their homes along with 350 others — making it one of the worst hit areas by Hurricane Ike. Now Dearman and others have something else in common.

They are two of 14 who in a matter of days will start seeing their homes rebuilt and raised on 13-foot pylons with \$1.8 million raised by Neil Diamond, the third most successful adult contemporary singer in the history of Billboard.

## **Houston Payback**

Houston Mayor Bill White had attended the concert and afterwards told Diamond of the plight of the fishing village about 45 minutes east of downtown. The next day Diamond, with his baseball cap pulled low and his collar pulled high, insisted on going incognito to view the devastation for himself.

He saw families huddled together on a concrete slab of a church, vowing to somehow resurrect their community, even though many had resorted to living in tents and cooking over open fires, surrounded by heaps of garbage that had once been their town.

Diamond decided right then to dedicate all proceeds from merchandise sold during the remaining half of his 2008 concert tour. He matched a portion of it himself, and continues to collect donations on his Web site.

“You could see in his eyes how shaken he was,” said Albert Myres, who helps oversee the Gulf Coast Ike Relief Fund and accompanied Diamond to Oak Island. “It changed his life. He wanted to do everything he could to see folks get back into their homes by Christmas. “I pray for them,” he said.

14 lucky families should make it this year. A Chambers County panel examined income levels and looked at home ownership before selecting these families from 70 applications with the names blacked out, said a committee member, the Rev. Danny Bidy.

Bidy believes most of the other Oak Island applicants should qualify for federal grants from \$21 million allocated for reconstruction.

Yet time is short for Oak Island residents who after several months battling mosquitoes and the weather moved from tents to FEMA trailers.

Each has received a letter reminding them the trailers were only to provide temporary shelter after the storm and they must vacate by March 14.

So while those receiving the Diamond homes are overjoyed, they also worry about those still left homeless.

“Many people need help. I pray for them,” said Pham, who has a statue of the Madonna in the corner of his FEMA trailer.

Dearman, who cannot get out of his bed because of deteriorating vertebrae, peers out the window of his FEMA trailer at the hummingbirds.

His heart is also humming since he framed the letter that says he, too, will be receiving a Diamond home that is handicap-accessible.

“I was sitting on pins and needles waiting to hear,” said the 85-year-old, choking back his emotions, “but I deal in facts. Until it actually happens, it's a dream that's come a little closer.”

## **Act of kindness repaid 43 years later**

*About 28 years ago, a fisherman escaped with his wife from Vietnam where he had been imprisoned and beaten by the Communists. David Pham and his wife, Son, became the first of 25 refugee families to settle in Oak Island, a fishing village nestled on Trinity Bay in Chambers County.*

*Diamond said he wanted to help the Houston area since it had been good to him during his early career.*

*“I had almost never been outside of New York City,” he said, when he agreed to perform in Houston in 1966 after his first song, Solitary Man, hit the charts. “I was a little anxious but excited to see Texas for the first time.”*

*Yet after flying into Houston, he realized he only had a department store credit card in his billfold and no way to pay for his rental car.*

*He was explaining this dire predicament to the rental clerk when his song began to play over the radio. He explained that she was hearing his song.*

*“A big smile broke out on her face,” he said, and then she exclaimed, ‘Well, Mr. Diamond we’ll be happy to let you rent one of our fine cars, and to welcome you to the great state of Texas.’ ”*

*He said he never forgot that “act of pure kindness and warmth” and found a way to repay it when he returned to Houston for a concert a month after the storm.*

*David Pham and his wife are one of the recipients of Diamond’s generosity. They now live in their “Neil Diamond Home.”*

*“It seemed like the right thing to do,” Diamond said.*